

METAMORPHOSIS OF PETER HUMBY.

CHAPTER I.

It would have been difficult to find a plainer man than Peter Humby. There was not one of his features which bore even a distant kinship with another. Whole cycles of evolution yawned between some of them, for though his nose was characteristically Napoleonic, belonging therefore to our century, his forehead was aboriginal, while his eyes and brows suggested a possibility of having been wrested entire from the countenance of some early and heathen Chinese. To make matters worse he had the complexion of a negro and a shock of light-red hair. The whole effect was singular and striking, but from the moment it loomed on your horizon you made up your mind that Peter Humby was about the least attractive looking person it had been your misfortune to meet.

The human mind is variable, its tastes diverse, yet I do not remember to have heard two even slightly differing opinions on the subject. Nor have I known anybody modify his first impression and say, as one does say, "Well, after all, when you get accustomed to him, Peter is not so absolutely hideous." He was as hideous at the end of twenty years as he had been on the day when you first met him. I imagine it must have been the irrelation of his features which aroused a kind of chronological confusion in the mind. A silk hat is not perhaps an altogether unlovely thing, inasmuch as it possesses attributes of symmetry and sleekness, but worn with a toga or a kilt it would produce in you much the same sort of exasperation Humby's face did.

Of course Humby was married; one never yet came across a man or a woman sufficiently plain who was not, plainness possessing its own inherent charm. Of course, also, he was married to the

course, also, he was married to the prettiest woman in the village. It was said that when Humby went courting he could have had his pick of the very comeliest girls. The confusion produced in their minds by those incongruous features of his resulted in a kind of fatal and irresistible fascination. And the village belle broke off her engagement with the village beau in order to give Humby an opportunity of proposing to her.

But even this triumph did not dissipate the gloom as to his looks, which haunted him up to the period of middle age. From the hour of his birth his mother proclaimed herself ashamed of him, repudiating her responsibility in the matter by avowing everywhere that if she had had the modelling of him, she would have turned out a very different article. She maintained sturdily, and it may be confessed also wordily, that her poor ugly duckling must of necessity "favor" his father's family, for nobody on her side had ever had such looks, an affront which Humby senior invariably retorted to by replying straightway to the "Spotted Pig." It may be imagined that this particular bone of contention, resuscitated by one or other of his parents once at least in the course of every week, did not tend to raise poor Peter in his own esteem. And indeed had I not a "happy ever after" ending to this unlucky fellow's story I should never have had the heart to set out upon it.

Humby was some fifty years of age when I first knew him. He was then a sullen-tempered, curt-spoken man of feeble brain and sour humor. To what extent his manners and character had suffered from the obloquy attaching to his features it were difficult to say. But so far as one could learn, he had at no time been affable. He was a milkman by occupation, and walked the roads twice daily with his twofold yoke of milk and ugliness upon him, uttering blood-chilling cries. The most careful of the housewives went out of their way to buy their milk elsewhere, regarding it as

their milk elsewhere, regarding it as next to impossible that a milkman of such looks should not curdle the contents of his transplendent cans. But he was an industrious, hard working man, and he had his supporters.

CHAPTER II.

Now there also lived in the village a Slade Professor, a notable artist and member of the Royal Academy. The Professor had founded an Art School, and, reviving the fashion of a by-gone day, was friend and master to his students. Since its foundation, the village had furnished this school with rustic models, so that the stranger walking through its straggling high street and its lanes, would come upon familiar-seeming faces, which, idealised on canvas, had been lifted to the honorable altitude of Gallery walls. In time it happened that there were but few houses in the village which had not provided at least one model, a child, a mother, or a grandfather, for the students to make "studies" from. Only the most highly favored by nature, however, attained the dignity of figuring in finished pictures.

Now I need scarcely tell you that Humby had never been harassed by importunities to "sit." Indeed this was one of the chief causes of his complaining, a tacit endorsement by the school of the village verdict. For Humby by no means shared the general impression on the subject of his looks. He examined his features in detail, and found some of them to be better even than those of his neighbors. To examine them in detail was, of course, the very thing he should not have done had he sought unprejudiced opinion; but it may be unprejudiced opinion was the last thing he was seeking. He had noticed, in a house to which he carried milk, a colored print of Napoleon, and his sensitive vanity had in a moment detected some likeness in that of the hero to his one great feature. After this he always sturdily maintained that he had "a

sturdily maintained that he had "a nose like a pieter, which were a precious sight more than a many others could say." And he eyed with brooding detestation all such persons as, not having noses like "pieters," yet "sat" to the students for their three hours' study.

Now things with Humby were bad indeed, for the next ugliest person in the village—a man he had always secretly delighted to believe a good many degrees more ugly than himself—had, partly by virtue of a dearth of models, but chiefly because of a certain stalwart build of chest, been sent for to the studio. For a whole week Humby did never a stroke of work, but lay out on his back all day beneath an elm tree chewing the cud of bitter introspection. "Jacob ain't got a nose like a pieter," he soliloquised, regarding his cherished feature from time to time in a fragment of looking-glass he carried in his pocket for that purpose. "Then why put Jacob in a pieter?"

As luck would have it, while he lay rolling his prone uncouthness sullenly from side to side, anathematising the fate which allowed his one merit to escape recognition, the Professor passed his way.

The students had not of late been pleasing him. Some unexplained laxity of aim and falling away from the very catechism of his creed had set them striving after meretricious effect. They had imbibed a taste for sentiment and smoothness. The apotheosis of the "tea-tray" was imminent, the oleograph held the floor. The Professor had been at his wit's end as to how he should stem the tide of wishy-washiness that had set in. The worst of it was that their dangerous and fellow self-applauding lapse was encouraged by their aunts and cousins. "Dear and honored Professor," a student's grand-uncle had that morning written him, "though an old man I must make the journey of a hundred miles in order to shake you by the hand. You have made our Archie. I shall live to see him President. I have done something in art myself and know

done something in art myself and know what I am talking about. Those cows in his last picture are as smooth and finely finished as if they had been cut out of velvet. I never saw a better bit of painting. And the bunch of roses in the foreground might easily pass for

wax, it is so exquisitely modelled." It says something for the Professor's powers of moderation that on reading this effusion he came to the end without using any epithet stronger than "Good Heavens!"

The rays of the westering sun shot low beneath the branches of the tree where Humby lay, his face upturned, his eyes closed obstinately. From the point at which the Professor stood the Napoleonic nose was thrown up vividly against the tree trunk, the aboriginal brows, the Mongolian upward slit of the lids, the negro mouth and coloring, the pale red hair, illuminated by a flood of rosy light, surpassed themselves. The Professor gazed. A smile broke slowly over his face. He chuckled. He rubbed his hands. "I fancy Humby's drawing would settle them," he mused. "If they get any of the pretty-pretty into that they are cleverer than even they suspect." Succumbing to the awful fascination inseparable from them, he lingered scanning the sun-suffused features. "By Jove," he broke out, "how the fellow gets on one's nerves. I should not particularly care to tackle him myself. Yes, I'll give him Humby. I say, my man!" he concluded aloud.

"Durned ef I be yourn nor any other felly's man," the prostrate Humby growled, his eyes still obstinately closed. The Professor marked the way in which the Mongolian lids assumed a still more upward slant, and how the nose came villainously down to their possessor's mood. Again he chuckled. He imagined Humby would sober them!

them:

"Get up, Peter" he said, "I want to talk to you."

"Then I'm danged ef all the wantin' beant on your side, for I'm bothered ef any uv it be on mine," the amiable Peter retorted. His countenance relaxed as if he congratulated himself on having got the better of an adversary. Perhaps he was looking for its effect, for he suddenly sat up and opened his eyes. "Oh, it's you, Purfessur," he grunted, more civilly.

"Yes. Do you want a job?"

"No, I'm smothered ef I do." He hung himself down on his back again and shut up his eyes with an air of dismissing the subject and its propounder.

"Oh, very well," the artist said, moving away, "only I thought you might like to sit to the students."

Humby sat up again, this time with energy.

"Wot be that, maister?" he cried. "Say it again, maister."

"Would you like to sit up at the studio?"

"Me—like—to—set?"

The Professor nodded.

"Pete Umby?"

"Peter Humby."

Peter turned it over in his mind with a deliberation in which uncertainty had no share. Then he slapped his thigh. "Blest ef I wouldn't," he blustered.

"Be at the studio to-morrow at nine then," the Professor called out as he walked away.

Humby gazed after him long. Then he took out his scrap of looking-glass and studied his feature complacently. "Dom'd ef I didn't think they'd come to it!" he ejaculated and smiled. Fortunately for itself and for him the glass was not wide enough to attempt his smile!

CHAPTER III.

With a serious face the Professor presented their new model to his class. Ridicule, rage, rebellion, were depicted on their countenances as the ton light

on their countenances as the top light fell on Peter's feature, and his forehead shelving violently back into the shade, gave him an exasperating effect of having a face that began at the root of his nose. He had combed out his shock of rusty hair till it stood around him like a tepid halo, making a gruesome jar with his bronze and weather-beaten skin. The students in the foreground murmured and shuffled their feet, those further off grumbled sotto voce, while those in the rear gave snorts of disgust. One cried "Good Lord!"

The Professor passed the several rows in review with a quiet eye, demanding silence. In two minutes it had come. He then began: "Gentlemen, we have been travelling a bit too fast of late. We have been giving too free a rein to flowery fancy. Sentiment and Romanticism are well enough when they do not lead us to forget that one of the functions of art is to make itself intelligible. We have to speak to mortals less highly gifted than ourselves. In order that the general public—and gentlemen, the general public is a factor in life—in order therefore that we shall be in some measure in touch with this factor, we are reduced to the necessity of presenting our ideas sufficiently like to nature that this general public shall be able to recognise the things we paint for the things we intend. Such commonplaces as cows and cradles should be distinguishable as cows and cradles, and should not be so rendered as to be possibly mistaken the one for the other, or for some third object—a haystack, for example. Nor in our repudiation of the realistic should we permit our cows and cradles to assume the semblance and texture of clouds. You have heard how Opie mixed his colors 'with brains, sir.' Let me suggest to you, gentlemen, if brains be not available, that you should nevertheless choose some medium of a firmer consistency than milk and water. Let me recommend you to return to common earth. Put aside hyperbole. Learn to paint cows. Learn to paint cradles.

to paint cows. Learn to paint cradles. And though bones are not ethereal, do not altogether ignore them in your studies of the human form! To assist you in reverting to the real, I have procured for you a child of nature (groans), a subject which shall give your idealistic faculties a spell of well earned rest. I have obtained for you a model—Peter Humby (ironical cheers, and cries of 'Good old Humby'), a model, 'good old Humby' as you say." Here the Professor levelled his dark eyes quietly on the loudest of the murmurers. A moment later you could have heard a pin drop. "Peter Humby," the Professor resumed, "the complex and intricate drawing in whose face will take your attention off its nobler attributes of symmetry and sentiment. The tints of his hair, gentlemen (smothered ironical groans), the tints of his hair, gentlemen, in juxtaposition with the tints of his complexion (groans a little louder), with the tints of his complexion—as I said the tints of his hair, gentlemen, in juxtaposition (the faintest of groans), the tints of his hair, as I was saying, gentlemen, in juxtaposition with the tints of his complexion"—the Professor paused indulgently—"will prove to you an invaluable lesson in relative tones. The modelling of his nose and forehead (a laugh). Jones, your cough distresses you"—the Professor rested a tranquil eye on the offender—"perhaps the studio heat is too much for you. I will excuse you if you wish. No? Are you prudent in remaining? The modelling of Peter Humby's nose and forehead, gentlemen, combined with his rare obliquity of eyes and brows, will do you good service in intricate drawing. The mouth—is that you again, Jones? You would do better to be advised—I was about to point out that the mouth of our admirable model will try your skill in both color and drawing. And if any two of you agree as to the combination of pigments which shall faithfully portray his eyes, I shall be surprised. Gentlemen, let me commend to your industry and attention

...mend to your industry and attention our model Peter Humby, of whom I should like you to make faithful and repeated sketches until you have mastered one of the most interesting and complex studies it has been my privilege to present to you. I should not, I think, in his case adopt any classic or heroic draperies. These would under the circumstances be superfluous. The man is admirable as he stands. And now, gentlemen, to your work!"

CHAPTER IV.

I was some months absent from the village. On my return the first thing that impressed me was a vision of my old friend Humby. He was mounted

on a dilapidated cart, which, having dropped by the wayside, nobody had made it his business to remove.

A crowd of youngsters stood about him whispering one with another, and eyeing him with mixed looks of awe and fear.

He stood above them with an exalted mien, holding one arm aloft, and with the other sawed the air. His old hat tilted jauntily to one side, was bound about with lace and ribbons, and upright in the front of it was set an ostrich feather. Such color as this once had known had been washed away by the weather, and the wind had broken it in sundry places, so that it drooped dismally. Round his throat were a couple of rabbit-skins, tied like a woman's boa with a bunch of ribbons. A pink and green rosette was pinned to one shoulder, a spray of dirty artificial flowers to the other. His trousers were tucked high up his calves, and their edges were frilled with torn lace. He wore one blue stocking and one red, and about his ankles hung strings of beads. A length of scarlet balze fell sashwise from his waist, and from each end of this sash dangled an empty lobster tin. There was scarcely an inch of

ster tin. There was scarcely an inch of him which was not decked with odds-and-ends, ribbons, berries, flowers or silver paper. And out of all this bedizendry loomed Peter's face, uglier than ever, if that were possible—but happy, supremely and ecstatically happy. He had vindicated his appearance. He had proved the village wrong. Art had claimed him for her own. His nose had found its way into many scores of "picters," and one of these—a study, the cleverness of which showed the Professor to have been in the right when he "gave them Humby"—had held a place of honor in "the New." Since then he had never done a stroke of work, but, handing the milk-business over to his eldest son, sent his time declaiming, posing and generally vaunting himself before his neighbors.

He recognised me with a nod and a gleam of the supremest self-complacency. Then he re-assured his grave demeanour, and began to speak, the children nudging one another, giggling and whispering, but keenly interested. "There was me," he said, "a-living all a-the-midst uv ye, a deliverin' melk same as ef I'd been the hordinerest. Till the Purfessur he come along when I was lyin' hunder that there helm, and sez he to 'em he've the hintricutest face 'sever I seed. There's tints in 'im and tones in 'im. 'Is nose and 'is forrid is modled like ez ef it wuz a 'umin form. Genelmen, ef you wants to be genrally at the 'public' paint 'em cows and cradles. Genelmen, ef you wants to be genrally at the 'public' paint 'em clouds! Genelmen, ef you wants to be genrally at the 'public' paint 'em Umby! And genelmen, sez he 'none o' yer melk-and-water—that aint Umby's style. He ain't no adulter. 'Is melk's fust-rate, tho' 'is son Zeke now carries of it. He's a child o' mater. Genelmen,' sez he, 'the modlin' o' Peter Umby's nose and forrid is just sich a posishun with the tints o' his 'air combined with a raal aliquity uv heyes and brows ull do ye the goodest turn I know. Genelmen,' he goes on, 'Peter Umby's eyes is sich

he goes on, 'Peter Umby's eyes is sich as I defy two uv ye together. 'ard as ye may try, to paint. Genelmen, I recommend to yer careful hindustry Mr Umby. Master 'im. Study 'im. He's a hintrest and a complix ez it's been my privillidge to meet. Genelmen, Mr Umby don't need clo's. E's hadmirable ez he stands. Genelmen, some fellies wants classy clo's, and some fellies wants harmour, same ez yer own fey-they Jake Welch (addressing one of the youngsters) were put in at the stoodyo to cover 'isself up with. But Mr Umby don't call for nayther. Genelmen, Umby is hadmirable. Good old Umby! Give 'im three times three! Which they did—'earty, and then the Purfessur he looks straight afore 'im. 'And now, genelmen,' he sez sharp, 'git to work. Mr Umby's a-waitin'."
